

10 Steps Businesses Can Take To Improve Diversity and Inclusion in the Workforce

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[12.5%](#) of the US population is Black, yet only [3.2% of senior leadership](#) positions are held by Black people.

In fact, out of the entire Fortune 500, [only 4 CEOs are Black](#) (and they're men)—that's a whopping .08%— and as of 2018, there have been 1,974 members of the US Senate, but [only ten have been Black](#).

Moreover, [18.3%](#) of the US population is Hispanic, and yet only [4% of company executives](#) are Hispanic.

I'll leave my rant about poor representation of women in corporations or politics for another blog post, but let's just sit with those numbers and what they mean for minority representation, or lack thereof, in the United States.

We make snap judgments and assumptions about others based upon learned behaviors and biases that are so entrenched in our system and insidious that we breathe them in like air without even realizing it. Today's society holds a great deal of bias, known and unknown. These stigmas and norms have become so automatic that sometimes we forget to stop in our everyday lives and ask ourselves an important question: *do these stigmas actually feel right?*

We turn to [confirmation bias](#) to find solace and comfort in what beliefs we want to be true, or what fear will come true. For example, if you're worried about being late for a job interview, you may have a sleepless night - leading you to wake up late for the interview. [Similarity bias](#) drives us to crave people with similar traits to ourselves, which is why you may notice all the fitness-minded people seeming to be friends or in relationships with one another, while [beauty bias](#) affirms that "attractive people" are more likely to succeed. What's attractive? Well, there is, in fact, a [golden ratio](#) of facial measurements that create the most aesthetically pleasing look to the eye: identical eye sizes, evenly distributed jawline and a facial length 1.5 times its width... Attraction bias can actually be measured with a ruler.

Bias has blinded society to the white privilege that so rampantly exists throughout our broken system in the United States. [Christine Emba](#), a *Washington Post* columnist, describes white privilege as: The level of societal advantage that comes with being seen as the norm in America- making life smoother and only noticeable if such privilege is suddenly taken away from you.

White privilege looks like asking to speak with a manager about a business issue, and somehow benefitting from communicating with someone who shares your skin color or cultural context. It also looks like feeling safe when a police car drives by without thinking you'll be discriminated against, given the rate of fatal shootings amongst Black Americans is [30 shootings per million of the Black population](#), compared to 12 shootings per million of White Americans, or like sending your children to a private school without worrying people will bully them for being there the same way a Black mother may worry. These are only the simple benefits of white privilege.

These cultural norms are easily explained by American history, when fully examined...*fully*, being a word that is hard to explain given so much of black history has been omitted from history classes in American elementary schools, leaving a skewed historical imprint on the minds of children. Here are some historical facts that are worth revisiting:

- [Interracial marriage](#) was illegal in the US until 1967.
- Black people couldn't own property in the US until the [Fair Housing Act of 1968](#).
- The [Civil Rights Act](#) that ended segregation that had been institutionalized by the Jim Crow laws didn't occur until 1964.
- The [Apartheid, a system of institutional racial segregation, of South Africa](#) didn't end until 1994.

To give this timing some perspective...if you are a Millennial, your parents were likely alive at a time where interracial marriage was forbidden and black people couldn't own property.

In order to step outside of the bias, we have to make our unconscious mind, conscious.

I, like many people, once thought the answer to racism was to treat everyone as equal and not acknowledge color at all. In recent weeks, I have come to realize, this thinking has been part of the problem. During a recent episode of my podcast, while interviewing Christina Blacken, she pointed out that choosing not to see color at all is not the solution to racism either. I've seen researched further, and found that Ibram X Kendi, author of the *New York Times* bestseller [How To Be an Antiracist](#) and a leading scholar on race in discriminatory policy spoke in a [2019 interview](#) stating *"the term non-racist, has historically been a term of denial...When you have a society with racial inequity as the norm, to do nothing in the face of that norm is to allow that norm to persist, is to essentially be racist."*

This means we have to not only acknowledge diversity but also take substantial action by practicing anti-racism to improve our world and create an equal society. This means that instead of just seeing the world without color, the anti-racism movement requires all of us to see color, and acknowledge the systemic biases that come with it.

Where better to start than in the workplace!?

After all, we spend roughly [90,000 hours](#) of our life at work (that's nearly two-thirds of our waking time on this planet!), and for most career-driven people, that's more time spent with coworkers than with relatives! How you interact at work, and the culture of your workplace has a profound impact on your ability to improve diversity and inclusion within your life.

It is time we took a hard look at diversity (or the lack thereof) in the workplace and implement real changes for the future. While I have many thoughts of my own on the topic, I wanted insight from a handful of Black and minority leaders who have added a great deal of value to the industry, and to this topic at hand.

- Lamar Perry: Freelance Director and Writer.
- Christina Blacken: Founder of [The New Quo](#) a professional development and communication consultancy.
- Michael Shawn Tucker: Advertising Executive
- Barry N. Griffin: Experienced entrepreneur and attorney based in Nassau, Bahamas
- [María Triana](#): Professor of Management, Vanderbilt University

- Toni Harrison: Managing partner and President of multicultural PR & marketing agency [TEN35](#).
- Sage Ke'alohilani Quiamno: CEO and co-founder of [Future For Us](#), a national platform that advances women of color in the workplace.
- Kia Roberts: Founder and Principal of [Triangle Investigations](#)

Here are 10 steps every business can take now to improve diversity and inclusion in the workforce.

Hiring and Recruitment:

1. Adjust how you screen and search for candidates.

When a whopping [80% of jobs are never posted online](#) but filled through referral or internal hires, your current employees play a large role in who gets hired next. If the majority of the staff is one demographic, increasing diversity through a referral-based hiring program becomes more difficult, and culturally skewed. The reality is that neighborhoods, communities, and schools remain largely homogeneous. In a 2014 [survey](#) from the Public Religion Research Institute, 75% of Whites identified as having no friends outside of their racial group. When a manager asks their team for a referral, the majority of their White team will only have White referrals.

Aside from referral systems, a large body of [research](#) shows that the hiring process is unfair and full of bias. A candidate's name alone has shown to immediately cause bias. Applicants with White sounding names like Emily or Greg were [50% more likely to receive interview requests](#) than Black-sounding names, like Lakisha or Jamal. While much of this bias has been unconscious, if left unchecked, it can harm your company.

When considering employment, [67% of job seekers deem workplace diversity](#) as an important factor in their decision process, especially for [Millennials](#) who make up the majority of the workforce. According to a [Deloitte survey](#), 75% of millennials believe an organization is more innovative when it fosters a culture of diversity and inclusion, and are thus more likely to leave if the company doesn't meet their standards of diversity. If you want strong talent, you need diversity.

Toni Harrison commented, *"We cannot unlearn implicit bias immediately, but we can do a better job with how we assess applications, perhaps even moving towards anonymous applications and gauging interest solely on a person's resume and supplemental materials before learning their name."*

It comes down to unlearning bias. While this takes time and education, there are some great strategies and practical software programs that help combat bias in the hiring process:

- [Unbiasify Chrome Extension](#): This is a free Google Chrome extension that enables users to remove visibility of names and photos from sites like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter, to mitigate any unconscious bias.
- [Textio](#): An augmented writing platform that helps companies create more inclusive job descriptions.
- [Gender Decoder](#): If you are looking to hire more female minorities in your workplace, or female hires in general, screen your job descriptions on this free site. This helps create a balance

between masculine words (driven, competitive) and feminine words (dependable, collaborative) in the description to attract a variety of talent.

It is time for organizations to use their curiosity to shift their culture and help everyone win.

2. Establish mentorship programs to grow diversity.

Weave inclusion into the fundamentals of your recruitment processes, from recruitment fairs at universities to internship programs, so that you are collecting a diverse pool of recruits for your openings. The reality is that only about [15% of firms have special college recruitment programs](#) for women and minorities, and only [10% have mentorship programs](#), yet, the firms that do emphasize these types of programs have a [9-24% increase in minority representation](#) in management.

When you create time for valuable mentorship, you create leaders for the future.

[Harvard Business Review](#) found that five years after one company implemented a college recruitment program specifically targeting female employees, the share of White women, Black women, Hispanic women, and Asian-American women in its management rose by approximately 10%, on average. A similar program focused on minority recruitment increased the proportion of Black male managers by 8% and Black female managers by 9%.

In order to increase the recruitment of diversity, begin by visiting campuses who successfully embody and bolster diversity. ([Here](#) is a source that outlines Universities' diversity index ratio.) Walking onto campus, you will already have an increased chance of reaching a broader demographic. The more establishments and institutions support one another for their diversity, the more valuable and accepted it can become.

Increasing diverse hires is one thing, but in order for diversity to stick, you must account for inclusivity, the act of including people who might otherwise be excluded or marginalized, such as those who have physical or mental disabilities and members of minority groups. One way to do this is by implementing diverse mentorship. Minorities ([32 percent](#)) are more likely than the average respondent (27 percent) to say mentoring is "extremely important" to their careers, and note that it isn't only for the benefit of the employees to provide mentorship... In some instances, mentorship programs have translated into a [72% higher retention rate](#) amongst mentees of the program. In short, if you want your staff to stick around, mentor them.

While having a mentor of similar background, race or culture may feel comfortable, there is a great deal of value in working with someone that comes from a varied worldview and perspective. This is an opportunity for both parties to break down preconceived perceptions and learn to view the world from a broader aperture.

María Triana shared that, *"Because most people mentor others who are like them, employees from underrepresented minority groups do not always have access to mentors in the upper echelons of organizations if those upper echelons are not diverse. Participating in mentoring and joining professional networks both inside the organization and outside the organization are helpful to creating more diverse organizations."*

So, how do you make a successful diverse mentorship program? Here are a few first steps:

- Be transparent about the objectives and goals of the program. Don't be shy to acknowledge a goal to increase diversity within corporate relationships.
- Develop cultural competency: Encourage mentors to actively seek out and learn the background of their mentees, and vice-versa.
- Protect mentorship time: establish specific times for mentors and mentees to meet with a strict rule forbidding interruptions. Prioritize the program to show the value it holds and aid in building trust between participants.
- Measure results: Gauge the program by measuring promotions, retention rates, and advancement statistics. Include qualitative data through testimonials and assessments about participants' views on their career, and cultural and diversity competency and growth.
- Have a third party point of contact: Establish a neutral contact within the program for any anonymous or named complaints or concerns to be raised. Create a safe space for both parties to come if needed.

Education:

3. Acknowledge the lack of diversity in the first place.

In any situation when things aren't working right, whether it be an addiction, a damaged relationship or a cultural struggle, the first step is to acknowledge a problem that exists in the first place. Taking the cultural-blindness approach and choosing not to notice differences isn't helping anyone. For many people, it may feel like walking on eggshells, unsure of what to say or how to react, but, the way of the future is to acknowledge a change that needs to happen in the first place.

When employees feel respected and understood, they are more likely to be engaged in their work. In a workforce where [70% of employees are not engaged](#), improving the cultural respect and racial diversity may lend towards greater engagement and job satisfaction. Lamar Perry advises to *“develop affinity groups within your company which allows participants to speak with other staff of color, at various levels within the organization. The truth is, microaggressions are committed by even the most well-intentioned people and staffers should have access to decompress and share resources within a company-sanctioned safe space.”*

For leaders of a team or the CEO of a corporation, begin to shift the method of communication. Turn to the facts, share statistics of your organization's diversity within roles, teams, and hierarchy. Use this hard data as a means to acknowledge change is needed, and revert back to them to show the evolution of diversity over time.

Leaders also need to take explicit and public accountability, if necessary, for their lack of diversity in senior and board level management. In my conversation with Perry, he also mentioned that if the systemic change was to occur, that does mean those currently in power can't all stay there. While this may be difficult, when differences go ignored, businesses miss out on the benefits of diversity.

Improving diversity and inclusion in the workplace isn't only based upon a percentage shift of employees, it comes down to changing the culture of the organization. Hiring a more diverse staff is one thing, but generating a workplace climate that embraces and amplifies differences is another.

4. Make diversity training an available option for managers, without being forceful.

People don't like being told what to do and having opinions forced upon you often can backfire. Forcing choice upon your staff will create followers, giving them a free choice (based on your recommendation) will create leaders. A study from the [University of Toronto](#) observed White participants who read a brochure about prejudice towards Blacks. When the participants were pressured to agree with the content, it actually strengthened their bias against Black people, whereas when given the freedom to choose their opinion, their bias was reduced.

Instead of making diversity training mandatory, implement voluntary training opportunities on diversity. This shifts the mindset from, "I am forced to learn about this" to, "I am making the choice to show up, therefore, I must be pro-diversity".

The training can't be a one-and-done event. According to Christina Blacken, *"becoming anti-racist and creating an anti-bias lens is like the gym. It's a lifetime commitment of training and dedication which builds your strength, endurance, and changes your body and mind."*

A [40-year study on diversity training](#) found that while there were positive results on employee's knowledge, attitudes, and actions around diverse groups, their attitudes regressed over time to what they were before the training event.

Kia Roberts stated, "A key step for improving diversity and inclusion training is to recognize that generalized, one-size-fits all solutions for diversity and inclusion training are highly ineffective, and also have been shown to cause resentments within some employee groups who feel attacked and forced to attend training that they feel do not apply to them." Kia's proposed solution, *"pinpoint trending diversity and inclusion concerns within their specific workplace, and tailor the training so that they address these specific issues in an engaging and informative way."*

Instead of planning an annual one-time workshop or day of training, implement a series of events, celebrations, and programs for continued learning and awareness. Create organization-wide awareness of culturally diverse events. Leverage [online diversity calendars](#) to be shared with staff to keep them informed of every religious, cultural, or racial holiday. The more informed and aware your staff becomes, the easier it is to support and celebrate differences while planning business schedules to accommodate everyone. This practice will help shift diversity training from a lecture into a culture.

Create a culture that embraces diversity so much so that employees feel strange when a meeting is filled with a single demographic or gender.

5. Change your language.

In a [Harvard Business Review](#) survey 75% of respondents affirmed that superficial policies or language lacked the ability to spark any significant racial change. Although they identified that leadership's commitment to change anti-discriminatory policies was paramount, it was important to understand the uniqueness of every business.

Barry N. Griffin stated, *"It should be clear that your company values and strives for racial (and other) diversity in the workplace, and strives to create a safe space for all, free from discrimination and toxicity. This can be achieved through clear and unambiguous statements in employee manuals and employment contracts."*

Lukewarm policies about the buzzwords “diversity and inclusion” really only make change on paper, especially when corporations tiptoe around the reality of what diversity actually entails by using palatable and discrete verbiage such as, “diversity of opinion” or “diversity of thought”. Some corporations have even deemed that [12 White, blue-eyed, blonde men in a room](#) with varied viewpoints is a definition of diversity. Instead of focusing on diversity, which can have many definitions, explicitly call out “racial diversity” in the context of the organization.

Be cognizant of how you identify and distinguish between race within your language. Consider referencing a writing style guide, such as [APA \(American Psychological Association\)](#) for clarity on what is appropriate and bias-free language. Appropriately capitalize racial and ethnic terms, for example, use “Black”, not “black”, and don't use POC (people of color) when you explicitly are referring to a single race or ethnicity.

While a handbook is only a piece of the puzzle, remember, your words become actions. So, make sure your words are worded right.

Culture:

6. Change the grievance and complaint system.

Once people see that a grievance system isn't warding off bad behavior in their organization, they may become less likely to speak up. The benefit no longer outweighs the struggle of coming forward and potentially rustling some major corporate feathers. While there are many people who support diversity, it can be overshadowed by the few leaders who do not. Data shows that [76% of Black employees and 58% of Hispanic employees](#) have experienced racial harassment at work, yet in the last 20 years (1997-2018) there have only been [710,052 cases \(roughly 1%\) formally reported](#).

Barry Griffin shared a past experience working at a company where *“a senior manager who happened to be a white woman was known for her questionable attitudes on race and socio-economic issues that made many black employees uncomfortable. Because of her senior position, no one felt empowered to speak out. So while the company prided itself on diversity and inclusiveness, the experience of employees on the ground level was quite different.”*

To save your organization from a similar issue, consider a more flexible complaint system that offers more than one path for resolution. Instead of filing a complaint that results in some form of formal hearing process where corporate action is taken (firing, probation, legal action), also offer informal mediation. Create a space where a complainant can request a mediator to host a conversation to remediate the problems. If the issue is at hand is clearly violating laws or crossing the line, the mediator is able to step in and push things forward without putting everything on the complainant.

It's key that companies also stop relying on human resources for this role, and instead hire a neutral contracted mediator to come in on an as-needed basis to ensure both parties feel a true sense of neutrality. While this is an investment, it will far outweigh the cost of litigation fees. This can be implemented as a first step before making the complainant feel pressured into an all or nothing approach.

Along with this, create affinity groups within the organization for support.

7. Celebrate all religions and cultures

It is no surprise that Christmas Day and Thanksgiving are two of the most celebrated holidays in America, with 95% of workers getting the day off. But consider this: [66% of workers in America have the day after Thanksgiving off while only 39% of workers get Martin Luther King Jr. Day off](#). Moreover, [12.5 million Americans](#) celebrate Kwanzaa, roughly [22 million](#) celebrate Hanukkah and [3.5 million](#) celebrate Eid-Al-Fidr, however, these days are rarely, if ever, listed as PTO vacation days for employees.

While it is difficult and nearly impossible to make all holidays a company-wide shutdown (history leaves us with so many special days to celebrate) there are ways to improve and increase cultural diversity and celebration within the workplace:

- Offer flexible holiday time off: Instead of pre-determining holidays off, provide a set number of “holiday time off” hours for employees to use to their discretion throughout the year.
- Provide [floating holidays](#): A floating holiday is granted to an employee to use at their discretion and is counted separately from company holidays and PTO. This can be used for personal needs and any cultural or religious holidays that are not set in stone with the standard holiday calendar.
- Theme celebration months: Host monthly themed events on site for various cultures and demographics: Black History Month, Women’s History Month, LBGT Month, etc.

8. Implement cross-training programs.

Companies may hold a diverse range of employees, yet there is another layer of diversity to consider: *where* they function within the organization. Different roles within a corporation are often filled by a dominating demographic. For instance, [women are more likely to work in sales](#) than men, and white men are more likely to have jobs in management, while Black and Hispanic men are more likely to work in production and logistics focused roles. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, jobs [held primarily by Hispanic and Black workers](#) were [hit the hardest](#), in many cases placing them at the front lines to the virus’s exposure.

While there may be an influx in diverse hires, the roles filled by diversity could be sequestered into one specific type or role or section of a business's operations. Combat this by implementing a cross-training program that enables employees to spend time working in various roles within the organization. This is often a volunteer program where employees spend anywhere from a few weeks to a few months within different roles. Sage Ke'alohilani Quiamno believes, “*Cross-training programs* provide employees with the opportunity to learn from one another in both developing hard and soft skills but connecting and learning from employees who have marginalized identities. These programs promote and reward a culture of collaboration.”

A program such as this has been found to [drive up internal mobility](#) where cross-trained employees move up the ladder more efficiently. It also lends towards increasing collaboration and an overall improved understanding of what various teams need. The more employees understand each other, within their race and their role, the easier it will become to collaborate and be effective in the workplace.

Promotions:

9. Generate transparency in raises.

For [every \\$1 a man makes](#), a woman makes \$0.81 and for minority women, that drops down to \$0.75. The higher you climb the corporate ladder (from individual contributor up to executive), the wider the pay gap becomes.

Raise awareness within your organization about pay discrepancy to activate social accountability. For each role, consider posting the job titles with the average compensation range. Communicate clearly what constitutes top performance in order to reach the high-performance salary range. When you can visually relay the information on a broad scale, it encourages awareness to make adjustments accordingly.

One [study](#) followed a firm and found they were granting Black employees, who held the same job title and had matching performances, smaller raises compared to Whites. Once this level of transparency was implemented the gap in raises all but disappeared moving forward. Consider internally tracking the salary and performance based on race and ethnicity to gauge the diversity and inclusion the corporation is upholding.

10. Hire diversity managers

There are sales teams, sustainability teams, and even event planning teams. But does your organization have a diversity team? In order to make diversity and inclusion a priority, you must hire staff that lives and breathes this value. If we could have hired an equally represented team by now, we would have... Now it's time for a group that monitors this internally.

Implement a dedicated hire, or team of hires, to prioritize diversity within the workplace. This diversity manager will be responsible for creating, recognizing, and implementing actions to promote and encourage diversity within the organization. Companies that have diversity managers report seeing [7-18% more diversity in management within five years](#), making them [87% better at making decisions, have higher profits](#), and a [19% increase in revenue](#).

A diversity team can be the amber that sparks the fire for change within your organization. Tucker stated, *"it's really hard when you go to a corporate leadership page and are met with a sea of sameness. It feels like there's no place for you."*

Seeing is believing. The more businesses and large corporations can install the sight of diversity and racial equality in the workplace the more future generations, and those young students can believe, the jobs they dream about can, in fact, be there one day.

Frederick Douglass once said: *"You are not judged by the height you have risen, but from the depth you have climbed."* While it's easy to look at all of us and just say "we're equal" it's time we look at a Black person who perhaps holds the same job we have in corporate, and get curious: have they fought the same battles to get that job we worked so hard to earn or were they up against social blocks we don't even see due to our white privilege?

Choosing not to see color, or deciding people of color are equal to you is not enough... Now is the time we take action and become anti-racist. Now is the time we take a stand for true equality. Do you want to be the generation that fixes these systems? Do you want to be a part of history that truly gives people the freedom this country so deeply idolizes?

I do, and I hope you do too.

And as Martin Luther King Jr. said, *“The ultimate tragedy is not oppression and cruelty by the bad people but the silence over that by the good people.”*

No one is free until we’re all free.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/ashleystahl/2020/07/21/10-steps-businesses-can-take-to-improve-diversity-and-inclusion-in-the-workforce/?sh=30036c19343e>